

Analysis of Politeness Principle in Business Letters

Dan Ren^{*}, Yi Liu^a

School of International Studies, University of Science and Technology Liaoning, Anshan 114000, China

**Corresponding author e-mail: 985402784@qq.com, ^aliuyi791112@163.com*

ABSTRACT. *Under the promotion of economic globalization, China's trade with other countries has also reached a historical peak. Business English letter as a medium to convey business information, its role should not be underestimated. A suitable English business letter can not only establish a good corporate image, but also promote the success of cooperation. Politeness principle is one of the principles that must be observed when writing business English letters. It is embodied in all kinds of letters. When people need to write specific business English letters, they must choose proper politeness principles according to business type and background. This paper analyzes different transmitting ways of positive information and negative information in English business letters and the embodiment of politeness principle. This study also discusses the use of politeness principle and its influencing factors in different contexts. Based on Leach's politeness principle, this paper makes a detailed analysis of different English business letters and probes into the specific use of politeness principle in different types of letters. This study applies the method from special to general, from point to surface to analyze, from analyzing an English business letter to a class of business English letters, and finds that the politeness principle has its corresponding embodiment in both positive and negative information transmission.*

KEYWORDS: *Business letter, Politeness principle, Use*

1. Basic definitions and concepts

Business English letter and Politeness principle will be briefly introduced in this section in terms of definition and features, which is of great importance to the following parts in this paper.

1.1 English Business Letters

Business English letter is a letter with English as the communication language and business information as the writing content. Its main purpose is to build partnerships with companies in other countries and push forward the process of collaboration. Next, the author will elaborate on several different classification angles and give corresponding examples.

Firstly, take the content of the letter as the classification criterion. “The most commonly used are request letters, reply letters, claim and adjustment letters and so on.

Secondly, take the nature of business information as the classification standard. The most commonly used business letters could be separated into three categories: regular letters, negative news letters and persuasive letters.

Thirdly, take various functions in the business process as the classification standard. Such as negotiation letter, confirmation letter, payment letter, etc.

Fourthly, take business objectives as the classification criteria. Such as the establishment of business relations letter, quotation letter, order letter, complaint letter, etc.

As a crucial step in foreign trade, business English letter writing has its own characteristics. The choice of words is quite different from the letters we usually write.

(1) Accuracy and Formality

In the process of writing business English letter, the vocabulary used is quite different from that used in our daily life. The wording of business English letter should be accurate and clear, and it is not allowed to use words that may cause ambiguity. At the same time, business English letter is also very formal in terms of words, to avoid the emergence of those life words. For example, 本厂已迁移到上述地址, 特此通知. I inform you that I have now removed my factory to the above address. “Inform” instead of “tell” will make the letter more formal.

(2) Professional

“Business English letters use many business terms and abbreviations that are not accessible in daily life, which also reflects the professionalism of business English letters.” Business terms originate from international industry conventions, are based on long-term business practices, and are well known and recognized by the industry. For example, perform invoice (形式发票), import variable duties (进口差价税) and so on. Compared with other languages, abbreviations are more concise. Such as CIF (cost, insurance and freight 到岸价), FOB (free on board 离岸价), L/C (letter of credit 信用证), BL (bill of lading 提单), etc.

(3) Politeness

Business English letter can describe the figure of the company, and be regarded as the stepping stone of a business. In the process of business English correspondence, both sides hope to create a good image of their business and cooperate successfully. Therefore, when addresser writing a business English letter, it is very important to use polite words to fully show respect for the other party.

1.2 Politeness Principle

1.2.1 Politeness Principle proposed by Leech

Leech divided the politeness principle into six categories, each of which included one criterion and two sub-criteria.

i. The Tact Maxim

(a) Minimize the cost to others. (b) Maximize the benefit to others.

ii. The Generosity Maxim

(a) Minimize the benefit to self. (b) Maximize the cost to self.

iii. The Approbation Maxim

(a) Minimize dispraise of others. (b) Maximize praise of others.

iv. The Modesty Maxim

(a) Minimize praise of self. (b) Maximize dispraise of self.

v. The Agreement Maxim

(a) Minimize disagreement between self and others.

(b) Maximize agreement between self and others.

vi. The Sympathy Maxim

(a) Minimize antipathy between self and others.

(b) Maximize sympathy between self and others.

1.2.2 Brown & Levinson's Face Theory

Brown and Levinson expound "face" as "the public image of a person that each member of society wishes to earn for himself". In conversations with other people, the image could be damaged, maintained or enhanced. "They believe that every social participant has two kinds of face: positive face and negative face." Positive face is the hope of others' approval, love, appreciation and respect; negative face is the hope that the other party will not impose their views on themselves, and their own behavior will not be affected by external influence, and they have their own choice of action freedom. Brown and Levinson believe that both kinds of faces are attacked in conversation, that is, both positive face and negative face are threatened by the speaker and the listener.

2. The Representation of Politeness Principle in Business Letters

2.1 Politeness's positive representation in business letters

Order letters, thank-you letters, etc. are all letters that convey positive information. It is much easier to write than a letter conveying negative information." Just take a positive politeness strategy, reinforce the positive information in the letter, so that the reader can immediately grasp the letter when reading. From the syntax level, should use more short sentence and affirmative sentence. Brief sentences are good for reading, while positive sentences are good for sending positive messages. In the tenses of the active voice, so more can highlight the positive attitude of the writer; make the other party know the writer's courtesy and friendly.

2.2 Politeness's negative representation in business letters

In daily business communication, what we convey is not all positive news, and negative news is an inevitable section of business communication. How to make the other party rationally accept the negative news, its decision does not depend on the content of the information, but depends on the way the information is expressed. When writing a business letter about negative news, the writer has two purposes. One is to notify the other side of the corresponding negative news, which can be regarded as the primary goal of this business letter, but it also has another purpose, which is to maintain the business relationship with the other party. Although the message is negative, it does not mean to end the trade with the other party. The writer should be aware that any improper expression could cause the company to lose a customer and have a financial impact on the company. In the case of ensuring accurate information transmission, some strategies are adopted to demonstrate the use of politeness principle.

1. Use fuzzy language

According to the face theory of Brown and Levinson, if we send negative content, it may damage the face of the addressee, thus affecting the subsequent contact and communication between the two parties. "Therefore, when we need to convey negative information, we should use euphemistic expressions, and fuzzy language is a good choice." In this case, the application of vague language can make our statement more implicit. At the same time, this kind of expression allows both parties to keep their options open and is more emotionally acceptable.

2. Use positive expressions

"As you are usually very prompt in settling your accounts, we wonder if there is any special reason why we have not received payment of the above account, already a month overdue. We think you may not have received the statement of account we sent you..." This is a very common demand letter, and once the topic of interest is bound to be a sensitive topic of both sides. The letter does not directly accuse the

other party of not paying on time. Instead, it takes the other side's standpoint and praises the fact that the other party always pays as agreed, so that the other party will not have a strong resistance when reading the letter. Secondly, the writer found a reasonable explanation for the late payment of the other party, which may be due to the fault of his own party's work that the other party did not receive the bill owed. This positive way of expression not only conveys the message of payment, but also leaves a good impression on the other party.

3. Use more modal verbs

Modal verbs are verbs that have a certain meaning and can express mood. The application of modal verbs indicates the speaker's attitude and emotion towards the topic being discussed. The degree of politeness is also determined by the degree of modal meaning. Modal verbs such as could, should, would and so on have the tone of inquiry and discussion, which do not give people a preconceived feeling and can make the tone of sentences more acceptable. Therefore, the application of modal verbs is often used in business English correspondence as a branch of politeness principle. "We would appreciate it if you could extend the date of the L/C." The use of "would" here makes the request appear more euphemistic, making the recipient of the message feel that he or she is highly respected when reading, thus facilitating the realization of the request.

3. The Strategies of Politeness Principle in Business Letters

3.1 Analysis of politeness principle

3.1.1 Tact maxim

"As you are usually very prompt in settling your accounts, we wonder whether there is any special reason that we have not received the payment of the above account already one month overdue. Your continued support is important to us."

This is a common reminder in business English letters. This letter aims to convey two objectives. First, it wants to inform the other party that the payment is overdue. The second aim is to ask the opposite side to pay us money in the light of the previously agreed contract. To benefit both sides is a vital factor which can't be neglected in business cooperation. If you directly ask for money from the other party, you may make things worse and reach a very awkward situation. To complete the goal of payment, the writer used the tact maxim in the letter. At the start of the letter, the writer commends the fact that the other party always pays on time and expresses the good cooperation between the two parties. In the meantime, consider from the perspective of the other party, whether there are any special grounds that make the other party overdue payment, and at the end of the letter, indicate the intention of continuing to cooperate with the other party. The whole letter not only achieved the purpose of payment, but also further maintained the relationship with the customer.

3.1.2 Generosity maxim

“We fully understand the situation, and we admit it's our mistake, please accept our sincere apology to you. Here is the solution, we are willing to bear 20% of your economic loss and give you an extra discount coupon for your next order.”

This is a letter of apology that uses the generosity maxim. The writer should be held responsible for the loss caused by the company's mistake. “This letter adopts the second-person narration, and uses "you" as the salutation, which can make the other party more intuitively feel the apology of the sending company.” At the same time, the writer's company showed that it was willing to bear 20% of the other party's economic loss and give an extra discount coupon for the next order. These expressions reflected its willingness to "minimize its own interests" and expressed its hope for the next cooperation with the other party. By applying the generosity maxim, the sender's willingness to solve problems and apologize to the recipient can be more deeply felt.

3.1.3 Approbation maxim

“Allow me to convey my congratulations on your promotion to Minister of Trade. I am delighted that many years' service you have given to your country should have been recognized and appreciated. We look forward to closer cooperation ...”

Expressing appreciation is a very common means of communication in business English letters. The letter was a congratulatory letter, congratulating him on his promotion to minister of trade. It acknowledges their years of service to their country, uses positive vocabulary. For example, "delighted" and then congratulates them on their promotion in a positive way to create an atmosphere of respect and pleasure. The end of the letter indicates that the sender is expecting for more trade collaboration between the two countries, which also lays a foreshadowing for future cooperation. After applying the approbation maxim, this business English letter not only expresses congratulations on each other's promotion, but also further protects the trade relations between the two countries.

3.1.4 Modesty maxim

“In our continued efforts to provide quality service and merchandise to valued clients like you, we would like your help in answering the attached survey. By answering our survey, you will help us know how to serve you better. We understand you are very busy and appreciate your willingness to take the time to help us serve you better.”

The above is excerpted from a business English letter asking the customer to help with the questionnaire survey. First of all, the sender makes it clear at the beginning of the letter that the other party has been an important customer, which puts the other party in the main position. At the same time, the sender said that the purpose of the questionnaire survey is to better serve the other party, which is entirely from the perspective of the other party, hoping to provide better service for the other party. In this business English letter, the sender stated many times that the questionnaire survey is to better serve the other party, and this modest expression can not only make the other party accept the request to fill in the questionnaire

survey, but also make the other party feel great respect. This letter not only accurately expresses the sender's meaning after applying the modesty maxim, but also maintains the relationship with the client.

3.1.5 Agreement maxim

“We were pleased to receive your letter of October 15th in which you request to a price reduction. We have considered your proposal very thoroughly. Unfortunately enough, as we are going to purchase a large amount of new machines, we need to have adequate funds. But, we can offer you some gifts, which could be used as a promotion.”

This is an excerpt from a business English letter in response to a refusal to reduce the price. When a request comes in, it can be embarrassing if the company wants to reject it. But the letter defused the awkwardness by using the agreement maxim. In the letter, the sender first stated that he was very happy to receive the other party's letter and seriously thought about the issue of price reduction, and then expounded the reason why he could not reduce the price. This polite way of expression can resolve the differences between the two sides to the greatest extent and make both sides agree. Finally, the sender said that although he could not grant their request to reduce the price, he could give them some gifts as compensation. After applying the agreement maxim, this business English letter can make it easier for the other party to accept the decision that the price cannot be reduced, and in the meantime maintain the relationship between the two parties to ensure the smooth development of business cooperation.

3.1.6 Sympathy maxim

“Dear Sir, We are sorry to say that our experiences with the company which you inquired about in your letter of June 17 have been unsatisfactory.”

This is an English business letter, excerpted from the letter, informing the company that it has sent a letter to inquire about the company's poor financial credit. At the beginning of the letter, the author expresses that he/she is sorry to inform the other party of this matter. The author uses words like "sorry" to show that the sender considers the problem from the perspective of the other party and expresses regret and sympathy for the truth that the company he/she hopes to cooperate with has poor economic credit. This kind of expression can make the other party feel the sincerity of the sender company to the greatest extent, and the sender will try his best to inform the other party of the problems they want to consult.

4. Conclusion

Business letter is a crucial step to promote business cooperation, and its success will directly affect the bilateral trade. Politeness is a cultural inheritance and a linguistic phenomenon. It is an effective means to promote successful communication. Now, most foreign trade businesses still use business English letter as a basic means of communication, so we should apply the politeness principle to business English letters. This can accurately indicate the sender's intention, and make the other party happy to accept.

Based on the analysis above, we can see that when it is necessary to convey negative information, the politeness principle is frequently used. Because according to Brown and Levinson's face theory, when we have expressions that threaten the other person's face, we must adopt politeness strategies to reduce the influence.

The use of politeness principle in business English letters can not only make the intended message more receivable to the other party, but also leave a good impression on the other party, thus promoting the success of business cooperation. Therefore, it is simply to find that the politeness principle has been broadly applied in business English letters. In future international trade, senders should also choose to apply different politeness principles according to different information, so as to make the cooperation between the two parties more pleasant.

References

- [1] Chu-Jun, Chen. *"The Application of Politeness Principle in Business English Letter."* *Journal of Chongqing Technology and Business University (Social Science Edition)* (2008).
- [2] Ming-Yun, Chi. *"On the Pragmatic Politeness Principle for Writing Business Letter in English."* *Journal of Zhaotong Teacher's College* (2005).
- [3] Fang, Hong. *"The Characteristics and the Embodiment of the Politeness Principle in English Business Letter."* *logistics engineering and management* (2015).
- [4] Sisi, Ma. *"The Application of Politeness Principle in Business English Letter."* *Over Seas English* 22 (2019): 90-91+97.
- [5] Wang, Miao. "Application of Euphemism in Business Letters Teaching Based on Politeness Principle." 4th International Symposium on Social Science (ISSS 2018) 2018.
- [6] Shuo, Zhai. *Application of Cooperative Principle and Politeness Principle in English Business Letters.* Diss. 2009.